



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The Appomattox

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Image: The Appomattox Statue. File photo, Alexandria Times.

The sudden removal of Alexandria's Confederate monument, Appomattox, on June 2 has led to conversations about its meaning. Since its unveiling, this monument has always carried vastly different meanings to different people. For African Americans, Appomattox represented a past of bondage and was a reminder that resisting the status quo carried potentially fatal consequences.

On May 24, 1861, Alexandria's 800-troop garrison mustered in front of the Lyceum on the corner of Prince and Washington streets and marched out of town before the Union's occupying force arrived. Twenty-eight years later to the day, a large part of the white community gathered at that same corner to celebrate the unveiling of the Confederate monument Appomattox.

Emphasizing white unity, both within the South and the nation, speeches that day glorified men from all walks of life fighting together, "animated by the same devotion to duty, love of State, and hope of independence..." The police, fire companies, Alexandria Light Infantry and Confederate veterans locally and from around the region marched in uniform through streets lined with Confederate and United States flags. The parade route stretched east-west from Fairfax to Payne streets and north-south from Duke to Oronoco streets, weaving five miles through town.

For the white community filling the streets for the unveiling, this monument carried multiple meanings. It was an opportunity to remember the Confederate soldiers who died. It was also, however, a large-scale celebration of the "Lost Cause," a public reframing of the Civil War. This mythology formed almost immediately after the war, reshaping history that is even taught today.

At its heart, it claims the South was defending states' rights, not slavery. Whites in both the North and the South eagerly embraced this mythology, allowing the nation to unify around shared ideas of patriotism while enabling systemic white supremacy to continue.

At the monument's unveiling, Capt. R. Travers Daniel opened the festivities saying: "Let us hope ... not one individual will remain disfranchised – not one will stand an alien in the land of his birth ..." This statement did not need to mention race to make clear it referred only to white, and male, Southerners. For the more than 6,000 African American residents of Alexandria, this occasion was nothing to celebrate. The Jim Crow era had already begun. In 1871, the conservative Democratic party regained control of local politics and established a second-class status for African Americans through segregation and public policing.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

In the decade after the monument's unveiling, white mobs publicly murdered Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas in racially motivated lynchings. As the new century began, Alexandria's African Americans continued fighting against racism and segregation, while living in the shadow of a monument sanctioning their second-class status. This monument was a constant reminder of the violently broken promises of basic human rights. Until new legislation was passed this year, the monument was protected by state law from removal by any "council or municipal power or authority." It is important to note this law was passed by the same legislature that supported segregation.

With a new law allowing removal by governments taking effect on July 1, the City of Alexandria had begun working with the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the private owners of the monument, to remove the statue and pedestal in July. In the end, however, it was not law that caused the monument's removal, but a swell of protests after the murder of George Floyd that continue to demand reform and an end to systemic white supremacy.

On June 1, the UDC requested a permit to remove the statue the following day. On June 2 at 6:30 a.m. the statue that had stood for 131 years was gone, taken to a private location by its owners. The pedestal will be moved in July and the street changed to remove the circle.

Removing the statue does not erase the past, but it does add a new chapter to Alexandria's story. One where we begin to come to terms with our shared past and value all Alexandrians, honoring the full diversity of people who call this city home.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.